



In these weeks leading up to Easter we have been looking at chapters 21 and 22 in Matthew's Gospel. The theme is "the upside down kingdom of heaven." These chapters record the dramatic events and teaching of Jesus in the last week of his life. He has entered Jerusalem riding on a donkey, fulfilling the Old Testament prophecy of the coming of Israel's King. In his provocative actions and teaching he shows us what this upside down kingdom is like. The people are asking, who is this? By what authority is he doing these things? In the last few days before his death Jesus reveals clearly and powerfully to us who he is, and why he has come.

This week we are looking at the Parable of the Tenants, Matthew 21.33-46. It is beautifully and simply told by Jesus, the master storyteller, and would have been readily understood by those who heard him.

A landowner has a vineyard which he rents out to tenants. At harvest time he sends a series of servants to collect the fruit. But the tenants beat and kill the servants. Finally the landowner sends his son, whom the tenants also kill. Jesus asks the question, what should the landowner do? And the answer comes back, he should give his vineyard to someone else who will give the landowner the fruit he is looking for.

In the parable, the landowner is God, the vineyard is his people, Israel, the tenants are the religious leaders, the servants are the Old Testament prophets, and, clearly, the son refers to Jesus himself. The message of the parable is set down in verse 43 where Jesus says, "the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to people who will produce its fruit." Upside down indeed!

Here are some questions arising from this text for you to consider.

- How helpful do you find the parables of Jesus? Are they always easy to understand? Somebody said, a parable is "an earthly story with a heavenly meaning." Do you think this is adequate as a definition?
- What parables of Jesus do you remember most, and what parables have made most impact upon you?
- In this parable the bad guys are the tenants. Look at verses 45 and 46, where the paradox of the parable is plainly set down. Why do the religious leaders not repent and accept the Son of God?
- The gospel was given originally to the Jews. Why did they not receive it? How exactly did the gospel pass to the Gentiles?
- In the parable Jesus seems to refer to himself explicitly as the divine Son of God. Are you convinced? Why does it matter that we are called on to confess Jesus as God's Son? If a friend asked you to explain this, what would you say?
- What do you think is implied by "the fruit" which in the parable God is looking for from his people? Do you see this fruit in your own life, or in the life of our church?